

Overshadowed Shrines: Evidence from the Shii world

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Dedicated to all people who wish to pay pilgrimage to Shii shrines.

A shrine contains a certain sacred spot or space around which the whole shrine has later been built. This sacred core, a venerated spot or space, may contain the body of an Infallible Imam, a pious descendant of an Infallible Imam, or a tomb-free place where an Infallible Imam stayed even for some hours or overnight. Examples of such pilgrimage places abound: the shrine of the eighth Infallible Imam al-Riḍā (Persian pronunciation, Reza) at Mashhad, Iran, is where the body of the Imam is buried therein. The shrine of Hazrat Fāṭimeh al-Ma'ṣūmah (the daughter of the seventh Infallible Imam Mūsā b. Ja'far, and the sister of the aforementioned Imam al-Riḍā) is an example of a shrine where at its sacred core the body of the daughter and sister of two Infallible Imams is buried. An example of a tomb-free pilgrimage place is the Jamkaran Mosque in the vicinity of Qum to the east of Hazrat Fāṭimeh al-Ma'ṣūmah's shrine at a distance of around eight kms from the city center.

In contrast to the above, there are some other shrines, overshadowed by the shrine of a more important or illuminating figure. Examples of such next-rate shrines are legion in the Shii world. For example, within Imam al-Ḥusayn's holy shrine at Karbala, Iraq, there is the tomb of Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb (settled at Karbala 247 AH/ 861), a pious descendant of the seventh Infallible Imam Mūsā b. Ja'far and the first permanent resident of Karbala. Also, to the Qiblah direction of Imam al-Ḥusayn's holy shrine, there is the tomb of Aḥmad b. Fahd al-Ḥillī (757-841 AH/ 1356-1437), who is credited with establishing the Karbala hawzah (i.e., Shii college of religious education). Although both Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb and Aḥmad b. Fahd al-Ḥillī were really great and respectable personalities, few people associate Karbala with them. Had their shrines been located in a remote, shrine-free city or town, their tombs had certainly been regarded as pilgrimage loci or shrines in their own right. Likewise, the tombs of many outstanding Shii ulema are located within Imam 'Alī's holy shrine at Najaf, Iraq. However great figures they were, they are all overshadowed by the matchless sacredness of Imam 'Alī's tomb and shrine. In fact, it was due to the sanctity of Imam 'Alī's shrine that they were buried there.

The case of Imam 'Alī's holy shrine has another important feature. In addition to the first Infallible Imam 'Alī, there are two great personalities who had been buried there several centuries, if not thousands of years, ahead of Imam 'Alī. They are the Divine prophets Adam and Noah. This is well asserted in one of the pilgrimage-prayers (ziarat-texts) recommended to be recited in favor of Imam 'Alī. Despite their being prophets, Imam 'Alī has since been

regarded as the main personality to whom the shrine and the whole city are attached and ascribed.

Another case at Karbala concerns the shrine of al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Rīyāḥī. A prominent resident at Kufah, he used to be a pro-Umayyad commander and general; however, just in less than an hour before the outbreak of the Battle of Karbala, he left the Umayyad camp and joined Imam al-Ḥusayn as a soldier. He was one of the first Ashura martyrs. His tomb and shrine are located in a westerly suburb of Karbala. Had his shrine been located in another city devoid of any other shrine, his would have certainly made a pilgrimage site. Yet, his shrine is strongly overshadowed by the two magnificent shrines of Imam al-Ḥusayn and his martyred half-brother al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī.

The personalities whose shrines are overshadowed are themselves great people. Yet, the presence of a much more outstanding figure overshadows theirs. It follows that the religious significance and status of the shrines can be ranked based on the personalities buried therein. The Infallibles' shrines are always ranked higher by far than those of the non-Infallibles. Perhaps some hierarchy can be envisaged: first-rate shrines wherein bodies or relics of Infallibles are buried, followed by next-rate shrines which contain the bodies of non-Infallible pious or religiously erudite and learned dignitaries.

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